

Setting Operational Precedents

The Road to Covert Action in Iran, 1953 (U)

Scott A. Koch

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Scott Koch is chief of the CIA History Staff.

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August 2003 marked the 50th anniversary of TPAJAX, the US government's covert action in Iran that culminated in the fall of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq. Washington feared that the deteriorating Iranian political situation and Mossadeq's inability or unwillingness to deal with the increasingly confrontational Iranian Communist Party would lead to the collapse of the central government in Teheran. The Iranian communists, with Moscow's full backing, would then step in amid the chaos, seize power, and declare Iran a peoples' republic. Yet another country would fall behind the Iron Curtain. (U)

Reverberations from the US government's role in deposing Mossadeq continue. At least one contemporary account links the CIA's action in Iran 50 years ago to current global anti-American terrorism, making it timely to revisit that era.¹ Over the years, most scholars have focused on the tactical aspects and outcome of operation TPAJAX itself, but US decisionmakers at the time perceived Iranian events through the broad strategic lens of the Cold War. This article examines

the policymaking dynamics in Washington that led to the pivotal covert action. (U)

Antecedents (U)

During the 1950s, Washington considered the Middle East in general, and Iran in particular, to be among the great strategic prizes in the geopolitical and ideological struggle against the Soviet Union. But it was not always so. For almost 175 years, American policymakers ignored Iran because they had no reason to do otherwise. (U)

World War II and the immediate postwar years changed the US government's attitude toward Iran. During the war, the country had become an important route for American aid to the Soviet Army, engaged in a life-or-death struggle with Hitler's *Wehrmacht*.² Soviet troops remained in northern Iran immediately after the war, encouraging pro-communist separatist regimes in Iranian Azerbaijan and the Kurdish

² Eventually, almost a quarter of American aid for the Soviet Union went through Iran. Convoys using northern sea routes lost about 20 percent of their cargoes to the Nazis; however, only 8 percent of cargoes sent to the Persian Gulf for shipment through Iran failed to arrive. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World At Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 284, 404. (U)

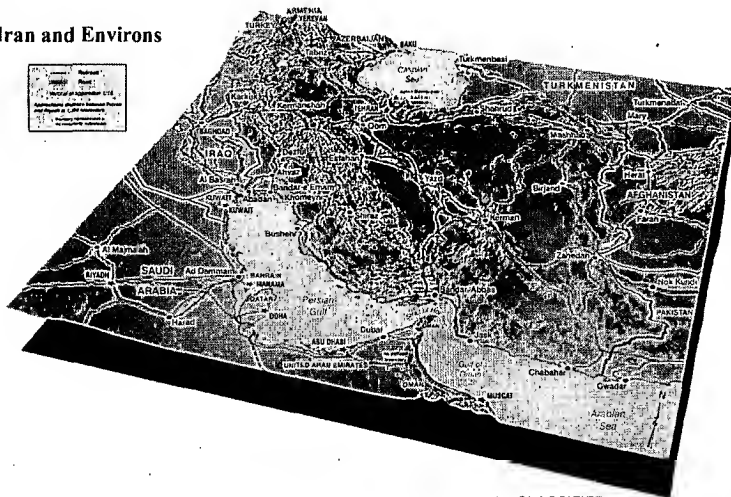
¹ See Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003). The reader will find a review of Kinzer's book in *Studies in Intelligence* 48, no. 2 (2004)—available at <http://www.cia.gov/csi/studies.html>. (U)

region. Washington anticipated that Moscow would demand the "unification" of Iranian Azerbaijan with Soviet Azerbaijan, and the crisis escalated from

World War II, but the postwar British retreat and retrenchment "East of Suez" created a vacuum that Washington felt obligated to fill. After London

and economic aid to Greece and Turkey in their struggles against communist-inspired insurgents, President Harry Truman publicly declared in March 1947 that

Iran and Environs



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January through March 1946. In response to aggressive Soviet troop movements, Iran, with the strong support of the United States, took the matter to the United Nations. Faced with an almost certain diplomatic defeat, the Soviets removed their troops from Iran before the UN could consider the matter.³ (U)

The United States would have preferred to withdraw from the Persian Gulf after the end of

announced that Great Britain could no longer supply military

³ For discussions of the Azeri crisis in early 1946, see Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977); Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-73*, 2d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974); and John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). (U)

the United States would support free peoples everywhere who were "resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."⁴ For Iran, this "Truman Doctrine" meant that the United States was

⁴ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Harry S. Truman* (Washington, DC: Federal Register Division, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1947), 179. (U)

replacing Britain as the main geopolitical counterweight to the Soviet Union. (U)

For the first three years after President Truman's declaration, the United States paid relatively little attention to Iran, even though that oil-rich country was experiencing serious economic problems, widespread popular discontent with the government, and growing agitation by supporters of the Iranian Communist (Tudeh) Party. (U)

In April 1950, Director of Central Intelligence Rear Adm. Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter drew Secretary of State Dean Acheson's attention to "the urgent need for additional intelligence coverage of Iran." DCI Hillenkoetter emphasized that the CIA was unable to draft reliable national intelligence estimates on the country because it simply did not have enough information. He wrote:

[We can] tell US policy makers that some sort of crisis does exist, but cannot confidently answer such specific pertinent questions as: (1) how serious the situation actually is; (2) how adequate are Iran's own resources for meeting its present difficulties; and (3) how capable the Iranian Government is of using these resources.⁵ (S)

Hillenkoetter proposed two solutions: the CIA could try to diversify its sources, or, alternatively, "existing coverage might be expanded through the estab-

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lishment of a consulate in the strategically important southwestern part of Iran.”⁶ The extant records do not contain Acheson's reaction to Hillenkoetter's letter. (S)

**Twisting the British Lion's
Tail (U)**

On 7 March 1951, an Islamic fundamentalist assassinated Iranian Prime Minister Gen. Ali Razmara.⁷ Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's initial choice to succeed Razmara, Hussein Ala, resigned after only a few weeks. Then, on 29 April 1951, the Shah appointed Mohammed Mossadeq, a career politician and leader in the National Front, a loose coalition of political parties professing liberal democratic aims and opposing foreign intervention in Iranian affairs. Mossadeq's elevation set in motion a series of events that

were to bring American and British officials face to face with one of the most mercurial, maddening, adroit, and provocative leaders with whom they had ever dealt. (U)

Severe economic and political problems awaited Mossadeq, and it was not obvious that he had the skill to solve them. In a Special Estimate prepared one month after the new prime minister took office, the CIA's Office of National Estimates (ONE) characterized him as an "impractical visionary and a poor administrator," but, at the same time, recognized that he was in a strong political position that was unlikely to deteriorate in the foreseeable future.⁸ (S)

Mossadeq immediately turned his attention to the unfolding struggle for control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The Shah had renewed the British oil concession in Iran in 1949; however, by 1950, the arrangement had become a sore point in relations between the two countries. In March 1951, when Mossadeq was a member of the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament), he had submitted a bill, which was quickly passed, nationalizing the AIOC. Just three days after becoming prime minister, he signed the bill into law; nationalization went into effect on 2 May, retroactive to 20 March 1951. (U)

⁵ Letter from Director of Central Intelligence Rear Adm. Roscoe Hillenkoetter to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, 11 April 1950, Records of the State Department, RG 59, Lot 57, D 529, NND959286, "Iran 1946-54," box 4, National Archives and Records Administration. (S)

⁶ *Ibid.* (S)

⁷ Razmara's assassin was a member of the Fadavane Islam underground organization. (U)

⁸ Office of National Estimates, "Current Developments in Iran," SE-6, 22 May 1951, Directorate of Intelligence, CIA Archives and Records Center [hereinafter ARC]. (S)

The AIOC's nationalization brought Mossadeq and Iran into immediate conflict with Britain. The British government owned half of the AIOC's stock and did not intend to permit nationalization of its assets without the compensation that international law required.⁹ (U)

**"The Antics of
Incomprehensible Orientals"**
(U)

Britain and Iran tried to resolve the dispute over nationalization, but differing negotiating styles and personalities made agreement elusive. Many Britons found inexplicable Mossadeq's seemingly impossible demands and unpredictably shifting arguments. L. P. Elwell-Sutton captured the mood of British policymakers at the time when he wrote, "Really, it seemed hardly fair that dignified and correct western statesmanship should be defeated by the antics of incomprehensible orientals."¹⁰ (U)

For his part, Mossadeq found the British comprehensible, but evil. He and millions of Iranians believed that for centuries Brit-

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ain had manipulated their country for British ends. Many Iranians seemed convinced that British intrigue was at the root of every domestic misfortune. In 1951, Mossadeq told US Special Envoy W. Averell Harriman, "You do not know how crafty they [the British] are. You do not know how evil they are. You do not know how they sully everything they touch." Harriman protested that surely the British were like people everywhere, some bad, some good. But the American envoy did not persuade Mossadeq. "You do not know them," he insisted. "You do not know them."¹¹ (U)

When it seemed clear that Tehran had no intention of providing compensation for AIOC assets at any level London might accept, the British mounted a multi-pronged effort to reassert control over the company. They hoped legal and economic pressure would convince Mossadeq to settle on British terms. If not, they were prepared to force him from office and replace him with someone open to compromise on terms favorable to the AIOC. (U)

¹¹ James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 64-65, quoting Vernon A. Walters, *Silent Missions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 247-48. (U)

London first asked the International Court of Justice to arbitrate the dispute, but Iran rejected the tribunal's jurisdiction on the ground that the nationalization of the AIOC was a purely domestic matter. London then offered Mossadeq two separate proposals to resolve the compensation dispute, but the prime minister did not consider them because neither addressed the issue of Iran's sovereignty over its own oil. The British thereafter refused to deal directly with Mossadeq. (U)

Turning to economic weapons, in September 1951, Britain placed an embargo on shipments of steel, sugar, iron, and oil-processing equipment to Iran—affecting almost everything that the Iranians could exchange for dollars. The AIOC laid off 20,000 oil workers at the port of Abadan, leaving Mossadeq little choice but to put them on the government payroll. Gradually, the flow of Iranian oil to the rest of the world stopped. (U)

London also staged ostentatious military maneuvers in the Persian Gulf to try to weaken the Iranian leader's negotiating position. A British airborne brigade arrived in Cyprus, and a Royal Navy cruiser and four destroyers exercised near the oil facilities at Abadan. Not intimidated by the display of British force, Mossadeq announced that the first shot would start World War III. (U)

⁹ In March 1951, the CIA estimated that 6-8 percent of Iran's national income came from the AIOC and that the company contributed nearly 25 percent of Iran's treasury's receipts. Office of National Estimates, "Iran's Position in the East-West Conflict," NIE-6 [draft], 21 March 1951, Directorate of Operations, Job 79-01228A, Box 11, Folder 14, ARC. (S)

¹⁰ L. P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1955), 258. (U)

Mossadeq Looks To America (U)

Like many in the Third World immediately after World War II, Mossadeq saw the United States as an anti-colonial power and looked to Washington for support against the British. His hopes were not entirely misplaced; the Truman administration thought that his position had some merit. (U)

Secretary of State Acheson viewed the British as overly preoccupied with their oil interests and concluded that London did not fully understand the broad communist threat. He saw Mossadeq as a potentially important part of a solution to the problem of Soviet influence in the Middle East. In Acheson's opinion, the nationalistic Iranian prime minister, in time, would become an effective bulwark against Soviet penetration into Iran. To that end, Washington consistently urged London to reach an equitable settlement with Tehran. Acheson apparently was convinced that an agreement would strengthen the Iranian government and, thus, promote regional stability.¹² (U)

Other considerations complicated the Truman administration's approach. The United States was loath to side publicly with Iran or put excessive pressure on London. Washington needed cooperation and support from Britain—America's closest ally—elsewhere in the world. The war in Korea was not yet over, and the presence of British com-

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bat troops was an important symbol of Anglo-American solidarity. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), created in 1949, was still in its formative stages and depended upon British participation as evidence of Western unity and determination. (U)

President Truman had no patience with those refusing to view the Anglo-Iranian problem in a global context. When US Ambassador to Iran Henry Grady wrote to Truman complaining that the White House was not listening to his advice, the president let him know exactly where he stood:

Let me tell you something about the Iranian situation from this end [We] held

Cabinet meetings on it—we held Security Council meetings on it, and Dean, Bob Lovett, Charlie Sawyer, Hariman and all the senior staff of the Central Intelligence discussed that awful situation with me time and again We tried . . . to get the block headed British to have their oil company make a fair deal with Iran. No, they could not do that. They know all about how to handle it—we didn't according to them.

*We had Israel, Egypt, Near East defense, Sudan, South Africa, Tunisia, the NATO treaties all on the fire. Britain and the Commonwealth Nations were and are absolutely essential if these things are successful. Then, on top of it all we have Korea and Indo-China. Iran was only one incident. Of course the man on the ground in each one of these places can only see his own problem.*¹³ (U),

The CIA's Position (U)

The suggestion that British forces might occupy the port city of Abadan or launch some other military action against Iran set off alarms in the CIA's Office of National Estimates. In an April 1951 memorandum to DCI Lt. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, Dr. William Langer, the deputy chief

¹² Acheson criticized “the unusual and persistent stupidity of the [Anglo-Iranian Oil] company and the British Government” when it came to Iran. See Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 501, as quoted in Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 453. Also, see Richard W. Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 102. (U)

¹³ Farhad Diba, *Mohammad Mossadegh: A Political Biography* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 131–32, citing papers of Henry Grady (emphasis added). (U)

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The CIA feared the
[communists] would be
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of ONE, warned that the appearance of British troops in Iran might result in Soviet occupation of the northern part of the country under the terms of the 1921 treaty of friendship between Persia and Soviet Russia.¹⁴ (C)

In June 1951, Langer sent another memorandum to Smith

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¹⁴ William L. Langer, Assistant Director, Office of National Estimates, Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence Walter Bedell Smith, "Situation in Iran," 20 April 1951, Directorate of Operations Records, Job 79-01228A, Box 11, Folder 14, ARC. (C)

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The documents in the CIA's files do not indicate whether Smith relayed Langer's concerns to President Truman. There is no historical evidence to suggest that he did so, or even that the president knew about the memorandum; whether the memorandum influenced the president remains speculation. Nonetheless, after Langer's mem-

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (S)

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (S)

orandum, the administration let London know that the US government disapproved of *any* military action against Iran. At a British cabinet meeting in September 1951, the government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee decided that it "could not afford to break with the United States on an issue of this kind."¹⁶ A potential military crisis had passed. (U)

Counting on Mossadeq (U)

The question of Iran's domestic stability remained, however. Could Mossadeq resist the Tudeh if it came to a confrontation? Neither Langer nor any of the Iran specialists in the CIA's clandestine service—the Office of Special Operations (OSO) and the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC)—thought that the Iranian communists had sufficient strength to topple Mossadeq without help. As long as the central government remained able to deal with events, Langer and others considered the danger of a Tudeh coup to be negligible.

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The Tudeh Party would come to power, the

¹⁸ H. W. Brands, *Inside the Cold War: Loy Henderson and the Rise of the American Empire, 1918–1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 234. (U)

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**The US was
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to political chaos.**
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CIA judged, only through chaos and impotent central authority. (S)

As of 30 July 1952, the US government was committed to supporting Mossadeq because he represented the only alternative to political chaos.²⁰ That evening, CIA representatives met at the State Department with Secretary of State Acheson, Under Secretary of State David K. E. Bruce, and senior department officers.²¹

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²⁰ It is difficult to underestimate the importance that American policymakers placed on improving domestic stability in the region. In July 1952, the Psychological Strategy Board characterized this part of the world as “a military vacuum, an economic slum, a political anachronism, and a house divided against itself.” (S)

²¹ Henry A. Byroade, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs; John D. Jernegan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs; Charles E. Bohlen, Counselor of the Department of State and member of the Senior Staff, National Security Council; Robert P. Joyce, Policy Planning Staff, Department of State. (U)

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The CIA's Office of National Estimates continued to think that Mossadeq would remain in power for the near future and that a Tudeh coup was unlikely—the same conclusion that OSO and OPC had reached the previous January. A November 1952 estimate informed readers that if the unrest plaguing Iran in 1952 continued through 1953, “rising internal tensions and continued deterioration of the economy and of the budgetary position of the government might lead to a breakdown of government authority and open the way for at least a gradual assumption of control by Tudeh.” Soviet intervention was unlikely “unless there is a far more serious deterioration of Iranian internal stability than is foreseen in this estimate. However, the USSR has the capability for greatly increasing its overt and covert interference in Iran at any time, to the detriment of US security interests.”²⁵ (U)

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During the last two months of 1952, both ONE and the Iran Branch of the DDP watched events in the Gulf, hoping that things would not change radically and that Mossadeq would be able to hold things together. Events soon dashed their hopes. (U)

Shift in the Wind (U)

Newly-elected President Dwight Eisenhower did not immediately turn his attention to Iran after taking the oath of office in January 1953. He meant to end the Korean War, having pledged to do so during the presidential campaign. To complicate the foreign policy problems facing the new administration, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin died in March 1953, and the White House had to deal with the implications of his death for Soviet-American relations.²⁶ (U)

Allen Dulles became Director of Central Intelligence in late February 1953 and on 1 March drafted a memorandum for the president apprising him of developments in Iran. Mossadeq remained the single strongest Iranian political leader, Dulles wrote, but the political situation in Teheran was “slowly disintegrating.” Given the Shah’s predilection to hesitate, forceful action on his part to stabilize and

strengthen the government was unlikely. If, however, a showdown developed between the Shah and Mossadeq, “and a real armed conflict ensued between the two opposing elements, the communist Tudeh elements might come up as the victors with their relatively small but well organized group of supporters, and with the assistance of the Soviet Embassy in Tehran, disposing of plenty of funds.” Dulles told the president that the CIA was working with Qashqai tribal leaders in the southern part of the country to organize a resistance movement that could become active if the communists took control of the northern half.²⁷ (S)

The Eisenhower administration had decidedly different views than its predecessor on the desir-

ability of an Anglo-Iranian oil agreement. President Truman and Secretary of State Acheson had encouraged both countries to agree on equitable compensation for the oil company’s nationalized assets. Negotiations had collapsed, however, when Mossadeq severed diplomatic relations with Britain in October 1952. By the time Eisenhower took office, neither the British nor Mossadeq appeared willing to back off from their publicly stated, and passionately held, positions. To London’s relief, the new US administration abandoned the search for a negotiated end to the crisis. Perhaps now, the British hoped, Washington would finally begin to see Mossadeq as the demagogue London thought he was and take appropriate action. (U)

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²⁷ Dulles reported that “A considerable supply of small arms and ammunition [for support of Qashqai tribal leaders] has been assembled.”

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Director of Central Intelligence Allen W. Dulles to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Memorandum, “The Iranian Situation,” 1 March 1953, Records of DCI Allen Dulles, Job 80-R01731R, Box 11, Folder 350, ARC. (S)

²⁶ Office of National Estimates, “Probable Developments in Iran Through 1953,” NIE-75, 13 November 1952, Directorate of Intelligence, ARC. (U)

²⁸ Brands, 272. (U)

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That same month, State Department officials and British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden met to discuss the Iranian situation. Eden found American officials more receptive to the British viewpoint than they had been under Truman and Acheson. Washington now considered Mossadeq a source of *instability* and feared that his continued tenure invited a Tudeh coup. (U)

The State Department agreed with Eden that Mossadeq had to be replaced, but its reasons differed from his. For Eden and his government, Mossadeq's policies damaged "British prestige, influence, and vital commercial interest." For the Americans, Mossadeq represented a weakened Iran and its increasing vulnerability to Soviet domination.²⁹

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²⁹ Cottam, 103. (U)

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Next Steps (U)

The emerging consensus that Mossadeq had to go did not result in agreement on his replacement. US officials briefly considered backing religious leader and former Mossadeq loyalist Ayatollah Abul Quassem Kashani. Kashani was attractive because he had a large following and had become a strident—and vocal—opponent of the prime minister. (U)

CIA headquarters viewed the prospect of a Kashani government with alarm and thought a Kashani-led Iran would be worse for Western interests than Iran under Mossadeq. The ayatollah was likely to be even more difficult on the oil issue and more resistant to Western influence, such as it was, than Mossadeq. While Kashani had a large following in Tehran, his support was not deep and he did not command the respect of the military. Consequently, the CIA thought Kashani was susceptible to overthrow by the military or even Mossadeq's followers. Moreover, a Kashani government would probably result in a "progressive general deterioration of Iran possibly leading to the eventual assumption of power by the Tudeh."³¹ (S)

US officials gradually settled on Gen. Fazlollah Zahedi. Zahedi had served as an irregular soldier under the Shah's father, Reza Shah, in 1915, and subsequently had risen through the ranks of the Iranian Army. Zahedi's anti-British views had led him to work for the Germans during World War II, although he was not pro-Nazi. The British arrested him in 1942 for his activities under Nazi agent Franz Mayer and deported him to Palestine; he was released on VE Day in 1945. Zahedi retired from the Iranian army in 1949 and subsequently served in a series of mostly honorary posts. The State Department recognized that he was not ideal but considered him acceptable because he was friendly to the United States and Great Britain. More importantly, he was willing to take the job. (U)

By that time, whoever succeeded Mossadeq was guaranteed American support. In a March 1953 internal memorandum, the State Department's Office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs outlined the steps that the United States was likely to take if Mossadeq were to fall. Although American officials would limit their public pronouncements to expressions of unwillingness to interfere in the internal affairs of another country, privately they would use non-US channels to assure the Shah and the new

³¹ Office of National Estimates, "Prospects for Survival of Mossadeq Regime in Iran," SE-33, 14 October 1952, 3; Records of the Office of National Estimates, Directorate of Intelligence, ARC. (S)



CIA officer Kermit Roosevelt in Tehran in 1953. (U)

prime minister that Washington was eager to help. Sensitivity to Iranian concerns that the country was becoming a foreign base precluded ostentatious and immediate American military assistance, but privately the Americans could assure Tehran that meaningful military aid (trucks, communication equipment, and other military-civilian dual-use items) would be forthcoming.³² (U)

³² "Measures Which the United States Government Might Take in Support of a Successor Government to Mosadeq," March 1953, Department of State, Office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Issues, RG 59, Lot 57, D 529, Box 40, National Archives and Records Administration. (U)

The photo of Kermit Roosevelt is from his book, *Counter coup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). It may be reproduced and should not be reproduced. (U)

Eisenhower Turns to the CIA (U)

President Eisenhower had several options to promote a regime change in Iran. He could use military force, but that was impractical because it would lead to war. He could hold out hope for a diplomatic solution, but that option, too, was unattractive. Diplomacy had already failed and the political situation in Iran was worsening daily. Finally, he could turn to the CIA to mount a covert political operation—in June 1948, the National Security Council had decided that covert action was a legitimate instrument of US policy.³³ This alternative held the promise of attaining the result that the administration wanted with a minimum of cost and world attention. If such an operation failed, the White House could disavow any knowledge or connection. (U)

Available documents do not indicate who authorized the CIA to begin planning the operation, but it had to be the president himself. Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose has written that the absence of documentation reflects the president's style:

Before going into the operation, Ajax had to have the approval of the President. Eisenhower participated in none of the meetings that set up Ajax; he received only oral

³³ See National Security Council Directive on Office of Special Projects, NSC 10/2, 18 June 1948. (U)

*reports on the plan; and he did not discuss it with his Cabinet or the NSC. Establishing a pattern he would hold to throughout his Presidency, he kept his distance and left no documents behind that could implicate the President in any projected coup. But in the privacy of the Oval Office, over cocktails, he was kept informed by Foster Dulles, and he maintained a tight control over the activities of the CIA.*³⁴ (U)

Official approval to execute the operation came from the US (b)(3)(n) in July 1953. The CIA had already funded TPAJAX, when, on 6 April 1953, DCI Allen Dulles and DDP Frank Wisner signed an authorization reserving up to (b)(3)(c) for the operation.

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Events Play Out (U)

The CIA was not quite six years old when the Eisenhower admin-

³⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, vol. 2, *The President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 111. Ambrose repeats this paragraph verbatim in *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 333. (U)

³⁵ Kermit Roosevelt, Chief, Division of Near East and Africa, to Director of Central Intelligence, Memorandum, "Support for Special Operation," Directorate of Operations Records, Job 79-01228A, Box 29, Folder 1, ARC. (S)

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istration authorized and executed TPAJAX. The “can do” attitude prevalent in the Agency’s clandestine service during the initial years of the Cold War was about to face and meet its biggest challenge. (U)

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As originally conceived, TPAJAX called for a royalist-led military coup against Mossadeq. The conception of the operation changed when the Shah issued *firmans* (royal decrees) replacing Mossadeq with Zahedi, thus providing Mossadeq’s removal with constitutional legitimacy. Mossadeq learned of the *firmans* and made plans for mass arrests on 16 August; royalist troops arrived at his house on the evening of 15 August to arrest him. The prime minister knew they were coming and had troops loyal to him arrest *them*. Officers and troops not in Mossadeq’s custody fled. On the morning of 16 August 1953, Radio Teheran broadcast news that the government had thwarted a military coup.³⁶ (U)

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The demonstration quickly grew in numbers and enthusiasm as the crowds surged through the streets of the Iranian capital, shouting their support for the Shah and demanding that passersby demonstrate their loyalty by displaying the monarch’s portrait—even if only on Iranian paper currency held up to a wind-shield. The soldiers that Mossadeq deployed to keep order lined the streets but did not interfere. Military passivity gave way to fraternization, which in turn became overt support. The prime minister fled for his life as the crowd headed for his residence. Monarchist forces seized the government radio station and Mossadeq’s authority collapsed. The Shah, who had left Tehran on 12 August and eventually landed in Rome on 18 August, returned to Iran several days later convinced that the people had risen to his defense.³⁷ (S)

Postscript (U)

It is no exaggeration to say that TPAJAX owed its success to Kermit Roosevelt.

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Roosevelt returned to a hero’s welcome at the highest levels of government. (S)

Although the CIA did not conduct a post-mortem analysis of TPAJAX, in September 1953 Roosevelt talked about his role before a group that included President Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the Cabinet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others. John Waller, chief of the Iran Branch in the CIA’s Near East and Africa Division, was among the CIA invitees and vividly recalled Roosevelt’s presentation. Roosevelt kept his audience enthralled for two hours and emphasized that the operation had succeeded because it enjoyed the support of the Iranian army and the people. It also succeeded, he emphasized, because he did not have Washington second-guessing his every

³⁷ The Shah’s reason for leaving Iran is open to interpretation. Roosevelt thought that the monarch’s nerves had failed him. The Shah’s recollection is dramatically different:

However, following a pre-arranged plan, the Queen and I had left Tehran before learning of the revolution’s success. It had been decided weeks before that if Mossadeq should use force to resist his deposition, we would temporarily leave the country. I had decided upon this move because I believed that it would force Mossadeq and his henchmen to show their real allegiances, and that thereby it would help crystallize Persian public opinion.

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1961), 104. (U)

move. Cables from Tehran were scarce during the critical days of 16-19 August—for good reason. “Gentlemen,” Roosevelt joked, to general applause, “I made a point of not letting you know what was happening.” No one seemed more amused than Allen Dulles.³⁸ (S)

Ending on a cautionary note, Roosevelt warned those present not to draw the wrong lessons from TPAJAX. “Now we’ll think we can walk on water, everywhere,” he said, “and we’ve got to be careful and restrain ourselves.”³⁹ (S)

Secretary of State Dulles had other thoughts, however; he was already contemplating a similar operation in a country half a world away from Iran and much closer to home.⁴⁰

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

Neither the CIA nor the US government heeded Roosevelt’s warnings about the seductiveness and danger of covert action.

³⁸ Author’s interview with John H. Waller, 7 July 1995. (S)

³⁹ *Ibid.* (S)

⁴⁰ Roosevelt, 210. (U)

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”

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

The relative rapidity and ease with which TPAJAX

had accomplished their objectives, however, deceived policymakers. They drew the erroneous lesson that, through CIA action, the US government could alter the Third World political landscape at will and with minimal expense. It would take the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 to vindicate Roosevelt, but by then the man who had brought down Mohammed Mossadeq had resigned from the CIA.⁴¹ (U)

It would be a mistake to draw a straight line from TPAJAX to the rise of the current anti-American, Islamic-based terrorism for, as the late British historian Herbert Butterfield observed, “The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the

source of all sins and sophistries in history It is the essence of what we mean by the word ‘unhistorical.’”⁴² Nonetheless, Middle Eastern perceptions of the operation and the American role exert a powerful influence on present attitudes toward the West. Policymakers would do well to be mindful of the dynamics surrounding TPAJAX as they continue their efforts to marshal Arab public opinion against terrorism.⁴³ (U)

⁴² Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, (1931), 11, 31–32, quoted in Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge January–March 1961* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961), 35–36. (U)

⁴³ One of the participants in TPAJAX assured the author that many Iranians also suspected the American role in the operation, a subject of bazaar rumors for years. The *Cambridge History of Iran*’s assessment is probably more accurate: “Nevertheless, Iranians have never had the slightest doubt that the C.I.A., acting on behalf of the American and British governments, organized the conspirators and paid the pro-Shah mobs led by thugs from southern Tehran, which, together with army units, were in control of the streets by nightfall on 19 August. By 1982, this tenacious rumour had been fully confirmed and is now seen as incontrovertible” (footnote omitted). Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville, eds., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, *From Nader Shah to the Islamic Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 263. (U)

⁴¹ *Ibid.* (U)